# European higher education, the inclusion of students from under-represented groups and the Bologna Process

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## Abstract

The central questions addressed in this paper are the following: (1) In the context of the EU's goal of severing the link between social class background and higher education participation, what progress has been made in widening access over the past two decades? (2) Has the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) helped EU countries to harmonise their policy and practice in relation to widening access to higher education? (3) What patterns of social stratification are evident in the institutional architecture of higher education across Europe, and how is this reflected in approaches to widening access? The paper begins with a brief review of the OMC, the mechanism used to harmonise social policy across Europe. In relation to higher education, the soft governance approach of the OMC is envisaged as the means of achieving the social inclusion goals of the Bologna Process. Data from Eurostat and the Eurostudent survey are used to analyse levels of higher education participation and differences relating to socio-economic status across Europe. The data demonstrate that access to higher education is strongly influenced by parental level of education and that higher education confers labour market advantages in all European countries. Four institutional case studies are then presented, drawn from different countries and higher education sectors. These case studies illustrate institutional stratification within each country, whereby students in highly selective institutions are more likely to come from socially advantaged backgrounds, whereas students in newer, vocationally orientated institutions are more likely to come from less socially advantaged backgrounds. The paper concludes by arguing that the OMC has been only moderately effective in promoting widening access for under-represented groups, since in the field of higher education there is lack of accord between the policy priorities of the EU and individual member states. Financial retrenchment across Europe is likely to have a negative impact on opportunities for under-represented groups in higher education.

## Introduction

During the post-war period across Europe, higher education was only available to a small proportion of the population, with an over-representation of men and those from socially advantaged backgrounds. In the UK, for example, less than 10% of the population went to university in 1960 (Blanden and Machin, 2004). By way of contrast, in 2011 the Higher Education Participation Rate for 16-30 year olds for English domiciled students was 40% (SFC, 2013)[1]. As Europe seeks to transform itself into 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (CEC, 2000), the importance of higher education to European economic revival and social cohesion has been underlined. Commentators such as Marginson (2008) and Robertson (2009) have argued that higher education is increasingly commoditised, with a tendency to focus on the competitive advantage it confers, rather than its social benefits. At the same time, in the wake of the

[1] It should be noted, however, that the latter figure includes sub-degrees (e.g. Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas and higher level vocational qualifications such as BTEC) as well as traditional university degrees.

economic crisis, with widening levels of inequality and a sharp rise in youth unemployment, the importance of higher education as a vehicle for fostering social mobility and cohesion is increasingly acknowledged. In 2010, the signatories to the Bologna process committed themselves to severing the link between social and demographic background and participation in higher education. A policy document stated: 'the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations' (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2010, pp. 27/28). If this goal were indeed to be achieved, this would imply an extremely radical social transformation across Europe, reversing the trend towards growing economic and social polarisation. In the light of these bold ambitions, this paper addresses the following questions: (1) In the context of the EU's goal of severing the link between social class background and higher education participation, what progress has been made in widening access over the past two decades? (2) Has the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) helped EU countries to harmonise their policy and practice in relation to widening access to higher education? (3) What patterns of social stratification are evident in the institutional architecture of higher education across Europe, and how is this reflected in approaches to widening access?

We first briefly discuss the EU's use of benchmarks and indicators to encourage policy harmonisation across member states, known as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Some commentators have argued that the OMC has generally been used to promote neo-liberal objectives (Robinson, 2009; Mitchell, 2006). Others have argued that accountability measures based on the use of benchmarks and indicators may be used to maintain the presence of social justice issues on the policy agenda. For example, Arshad and Riddell (2011) have analysed the operation of the public sector equality duty with reference to the position of disabled people and Holford (2008) has discussed the development of European indicators of active citizenship. In both cases, it has been suggested that the use of hard measures has been used to achieve socially progressive goals. In this paper, we question whether cross-country comparisons have contributed to greater social equality across Europe by raising awareness of existing inequalities. In relation to the social dimension of the Bologna Process, we examine the use of data to compare the relative progress of different countries in reducing social inequality in higher education. The influence of the EU on member states' policy and practice is explored through case studies of approaches to widening access within specific institutions and countries. In the light of this analysis, we consider the extent to which European higher education policy has the potential to mitigate some of the worst effects of global capitalism reflected in the intensification of economic inequality and social exclusion across Europe and the developed world (Riddell and Weedon, 2012; OECD, 2008; Green and Janmaat, 2011).

Throughout this paper we use the term 'higher education' or 'tertiary education' (the preferred EU terminology) to refer to courses at ISCED levels 5 and 6, which refer to academic and vocational degree and sub-degree level qualifications. We are aware that there are discrepancies between countries in the ISCED levels assigned to specific national qualifications, and as a result cross-country comparisons are inexact.

**Global capitalism, new information technologies and forms of governance**

As noted by Castells (2000), a new form of global capitalism has recently emerged which is dependent on, and has arisen from, new information and communication technologies. The destabilising capacity of the new global capitalism was demonstrated by the economic crisis of 2008, in which the trading of obscure financial instruments led to the near collapse of many European banks. New information and communication technologies have not only massively increased risk in the world of European and global finance (Stiglitz, 2010), but have also enabled the gathering, manipulation and exchange of information on individuals, social groups and public services which is used to manage and regulate behaviour. This has, in turn, led to new forms of local, national and trans-national governance.

In the early years of the twenty first century, buoyant financial conditions led to great optimism about the future of the European project, including its social dimension. The Lisbon Strategy envisaged that the emergent knowledge economy required ever-greater social, political and economic co-ordination and harmonisation between countries. Due to the principles of national subsidiarity embedded in the founding treaties of the European Union, this harmonisation was to be achieved through soft methods of governance, specifically the Open Method of Coordination. The intention, articulated by senior administrators in the EU such as Hingel (2001), was to encourage member states to adopt a particular direction of travel by using data to reveal trends over time. International bodies such as Eurostat and the OECD, charged with the gathering, analysis and publication of data, became increasingly important in the development of international education policy (Lawn and Grek, 2012; Lingard and Rawolle, 2011). Within Europe, the Bologna Process represents the central mechanism for harmonising higher education policy across Europe (Keeling, 2006) and in the following section, we review its main elements.

**The Bologna Process and the social dimension of European higher education**

The Bologna declaration of 1998 was based on intergovernmental cooperation and led by ministers of education from across the European Higher Education Area. In 1999, the declaration was signed by representatives of 29 countries and by 2010, 46 countries from Europe and the developed world had joined the process. These signatories agreed to the development of a common framework of qualifications based on credit and cycles of study, facilitation of student mobility, the development of a common degree level system at all levels and the fostering of a 'Europe of Knowledge'. In 2001, it was agreed to increase the emphasis on the lifelong learning and social dimension of higher education. The lifelong learning dimension focused on alignment of the Bologna Process to national lifelong learning policies, including the recognition of prior learning and the development of generic skills for employability. The social dimension focused on equal access and, whilst this dimension was included in the Prague Communiqué of 2001, it was acknowledged in 2007 that insufficient progress had been made in this area. The London Communiqué reaffirmed 'the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background' (London Communiqué, 2007: 2.18). This led to a commitment in 2007 to produce national action plans with effective monitoring. In 2009, it was agreed that each country should set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing the participation of under-represented social groups in higher education by the end of the next decade (Leuven/Louvain-laNeuve Communiqué, 2009).

The EU's commitment to tackling socially unequal educational outcomes was reiterated in the wake of the financial crisis. A policy document published in 2010 stated that 'the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should

reflect the diversity of our populations' (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2010, pp. 27/28). One of the EU's earliest targets in education, established in 2010, was that by 2020, 40% of European 30-34 year olds should have tertiary level qualifications. This was partly in response to labour market forecasts suggesting that, by 2020, the share of jobs held by those with the highest qualifications would increase from 29% to 35% of the total. Individuals with medium level qualifications would hold about 50% of all jobs, whilst there would be a decline in the number of jobs available for skilled or unskilled manual workers and routine office workers (CEDEFOP, 2012). According to Brakman (2006) this pattern of 'skill biased technological growth' is typical of employment trends in knowledge economies. Technological innovations boost demand for better skilled and better paid jobs, whilst lower skilled jobs either disappear or sink lower on the status and pay ladder. Nicaise (2010) has argued that the trend towards growing levels of economic inequality across the developed world, highlighted by the OECD (2008; 2011), can only be addressed by reducing the pool of low skilled workers and increasing the pool of highly skilled workers, so that there are reduced pressures to drive down wages at the bottom of the labour market.

Pressure to increase the supply of highly qualified people in the European labour market has therefore come from both economic and social concerns. However, progress reports on the Bologna Process (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2010; 2012) note the significant challenges involved in achieving the social objectives of widening participation for under-represented groups. These reports highlight a number of problems including national differences in understanding of social inequality and the nature of under-represented groups, the general absence of specific targets for widening participation of under-represented groups, the lack of systematic monitoring and the limitations of widening access initiatives and strategies. By way of contrast, considerable progress has been made in relation to harmonised degree systems, quality assurance, student mobility and the qualifications framework, all measures facilitating the free movement of staff and students and thus boosting the global higher education market. In the following sections, we first consider the nature of data published by the EU on widening access to higher education and socio-economic inequalities in participation, before considering how such data have influenced national policies. First, we describe briefly our data sources and the project from which they are drawn.

**Data drawn upon in this paper**

This paper uses data from a research project entitled *Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Education System* (LLL2010) which was funded by the European Commission as part of its Sixth Framework Programme. The project, involving 12 European countries and Russia, ran from 2005 to 2011. Two books (Riddell et al., 2012 and Saar et al., 2013) summarised findings on approaches to lifelong learning across Europe. Part of the LLL2010 project focussed on the contribution of the European higher education system to reducing or reinforcing social inequality (see Weedon and Riddell, 2012 for a fuller account of this part of the study). The statistical data presented below, which include data on the countries which participated in the LLL2010 project, were gathered by the EU to inform its analysis of the implementation of social aspects of the Bologna Process. Our discussion of these statistics focuses not just on their messages with regard to social trends, but also the mode of soft governance which they exemplify. We also present higher education institutional case studies from four of the LLL2010 countries. The case studies were based on analyses of official statistics, institutional documents and interviews with about six managers within each institution.

## The use of soft governance to promote the expansion of higher education across Europe

As noted above, in 2010, as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Union set a target that at least 40% of 30-34 year olds should have a tertiary degree or an equivalent qualification by 2020. In evaluating progress towards this target, the European Commission was able to draw on extensive data sets including the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and the Eurostudent survey, carried out in 19 of the member countries as well as three non-member countries. Analysis of progress in relation to the 40% participation target was conducted by the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning (CRELL). Set up in 2005, CRELL's remit is to provide expertise in the field of indicator-based evaluation and monitoring of education and training systems and their contribution to the achievement of Community objectives specified in the Lisbon Agenda and the EU2020 Education and Training Strategy. Clearly, the EU has invested significant resources in establishing data sets and supporting centres of statistical expertise to develop benchmarks and indicators, and in the following sections we summarise findings in relation to progress on expanding participation in higher education and diversifying the social profile of participants.

Analysis of the position of member states in relation to the 40% headline target was published by CRELL (Badescu et al., 2012). Figure 1 shows that in 2011, across Europe the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary or equivalent education was 34.6%. Some member states, such as Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden and the UK, have already exceeded the target, whilst others are well behind. The latter group includes old member states such as Italy, Austria, Portugal and Greece, as well as a significant number of new member states in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe (Romania, Malta, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary and the Czech Republic). Whilst some countries, such as Ireland, have set ambitious targets for the further expansion of higher education, other countries, such as the UK and Sweden, appear to have ruled out further expansion.

**Figure 1 about here**

Figure 1 also indicates some of the difficulties in making cross country comparisons. Germany and Austria count school level vocational qualifications (ISCED 4) as being equivalent to higher level qualifications in other countries (ISCED 5). Policy makers within these countries argue that ignoring these qualifications would present a false picture of the skill level of their population and would suggest that they were seriously under-performing relative to other countries.

## Measuring socio-economic differences in higher education participation

As noted above, the EU has set itself the ambitious goal of eroding or removing the link between socio-economic background and the attainment of higher education qualifications. There is something of a mismatch, however, between this aspiration and patterns of persistent socio-economic inequality revealed by EU data. Parental level of education may be taken as a proxy measure of social class differences, since those with higher education qualifications are likely to work in professional and managerial occupations and to have higher incomes. Figure 2 shows that whilst women are, overall, more likely to have tertiary level qualifications, the social class gap in higher education participation persists for both sexes.

**Figure 2 about here**

The association between parents' and children's level of education is particularly marked in the old member states, where participation rates have traditionally been higher. Belgium and Ireland appear to have particularly strong links between parents' and children's level of educational attainment. In all countries, children from families with low educational attainment are much less likely to achieve higher education qualifications. This pattern is particularly marked in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, where only around 5% of those whose parents have low educational attainment achieve a tertiary level qualification, compared with the UK, where 30% of those whose parents have low educational attainment achieve a higher level qualification. Iannelli (2011), writing in relation to Scotland, suggests that once middle class participation in higher education has reached saturation point, then additional places are likely to be filled by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Thus the expansion of higher education has generally led to more equal patterns of participation.

**Higher education and labour market advantage**

Whilst there are country differences in the proportion of the population with higher education, it is clear that in all countries, having a higher education qualification confers labour market advantage, although the extent of this advantage varies by country (figure 3). Those with the lowest level of qualification in Lithuania and the Czech Republic have extremely low employment rates. This is in marked contrast to Norway, where the gap between those with the highest and lowest level qualifications is smaller. Austria has the smallest gap in employment rates between those at levels 3-4 and levels 5-6, suggesting that vocational qualifications at ISCED 4 may be treated as equivalent to some tertiary level qualifications.

**Figure 3 about here**

To summarise, the EU has established a headline target that, across Europe, 40% of 30-34 year olds should have a tertiary level qualification by 2020, and member states have been asked to set targets within their own systems. As Iannelli's work on social mobility demonstrates (Iannelli, 2011), the expansion of higher education is essential to achieving a more socially representative student body, since students from poorer backgrounds are only likely to be included when there is virtually full participation amongst more socially advantaged groups. The way in which countries have responded to the EU's target suggests that those with low rates of participation have tended to be more ambitious than countries which are already exceeding the target, some of which believe that a ceiling on participation has been reached. This is of concern, since EU data show that social class differences in all countries continue to be very significant, and in countries like the UK, Sweden and Ireland would only be eroded by increasing participation, which in the current economic climate appears to be somewhat unlikely. About 60% of those with tertiary level qualifications have a parent with higher level qualifications, most people with higher level qualifications appear to have followed a traditional route from school to university without a break and most countries have a low proportion of part-time and mature students. The value of a tertiary level qualification is clear in relation to an individual's ability to obtain employment, and the majority of graduates have professional and managerial occupations. Across Europe, less than half of those with lower qualifications are in work, compared with more than 80% of those with graduate level qualifications.

Thus far, we have analysed the EU's higher education policy and its use of benchmarks

and indicators, hallmarks of the Open Method of Coordination, to encourage countries to reform their national tertiary education systems. However, as noted above, participation rates in different member states vary greatly and progress towards greater social equality has been patchy. In the following sections, we consider why there has been less harmonisation in European higher education policy than might have been anticipated.

**Cross-country interpretations of under-representation in higher education**

One of the goals of European higher education policy was to encourage a more concerted approach to the inclusion of socially and culturally disadvantaged groups. However, as is evident from table 1, European countries vary greatly with regard to the extent to which they monitor participation and the groups they consider to be under-represented and therefore in need of additional support.

**Table 1 about here**

Whilst most countries attempt to identify patterns of inequality in higher education participation, the Czech Republic and Norway do not monitor student social characteristics. Amongst countries where monitoring is undertaken, the participation rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds are monitored in most countries apart from Russia, Slovenia and Estonia. Differences related to gender and disability are also frequently monitored, although disability is understood differently throughout Europe (Riddell, 2012), with some countries focusing almost exclusively on identifying physical and sensory impairments, whilst others recognise a broader range of learning difficulties and disabilities. Practice with regard to the monitoring of ethnicity varies greatly across countries, with some countries like the UK using fine-grained systems whilst other countries such as Estonia, France and Sweden, reject ethnic monitoring because this might imply an essentialist view of racial differences. Many countries monitor the educational progress of children of recent immigrants, although the educational outcomes of the second generation are often not examined and there is often a failure to record country of origin. Some categories are used by only one or a small group of countries, for example, Bulgaria identifies mothers of many children as an under-represented group in higher education and Russia and Bulgaria include orphans as a discrete category. Russia also recognises people from the Chernobyl region and migrants from the Commonwealth of Independent states, reflecting particular aspects of its history, geography and politics. The lack of shared understandings of which groups require additional monitoring and support has undoubtedly hindered progress towards achieving the social goals of the Bologna Process. In the following section, we discuss patterns of inequality in higher education participation relating to socio-economic status.

Differences across European countries in identifying under-represented groups are likely to relate to population differences, as well as political and cultural traditions. These discrepancies provide a powerful illustration of the challenges which arise in encouraging countries within the European Higher Education Area to take concerted action to reduce social inequalities. In the following section, we provide further illustration of particular approaches to widening access, focusing on case studies of specific institutions.

**Different approaches to widening access across Europe**

This section presents case studies of four contrasting higher education institutions in countries participating in the LLL2010 project. Three of the case study institutions (Scotland, Flanders, Austria) are located within old member states in north-west and continental Europe and one is within a Baltic state (Estonia) which joined the EU in 2004. Estonia and Scotland have a comprehensive compulsory education system whilst Flanders and Austria have a stratified system. Scotland and Flanders have below 80% of pupils with upper secondary qualifications, whilst Estonia has nearly 90% and Austria has around 83%. The labour markets of Scotland and post-communist Estonia have low levels of regulation and worker protection, compared with those of Austria and Flanders, which have coordinated market economies. The case studies are used to explore the measures in place in particular institutions to facilitate the participation of non-traditional students in higher education. Each case study locates the particular college or university within the institutional architecture of higher education within the particular country.

***Case study of an elite Scottish university***

Scotland has relatively high rates of participation in higher education, with about 40% of each cohort of school leavers obtaining a higher level qualification (Caldwell, 2008). At the same time, as reported in this special issue by Gallacher, the system is highly differentiated (see table 2 below). All universities recruit predominantly from more socially advantaged neighbourhoods, and this pattern is particularly evident amongst the elite universities, with 38% of Scottish students drawn from the most advantaged neighbourhoods in Scotland, compared with only 7% from the most deprived neighbourhoods. Colleges are the only institutions which recruit more heavily from more socially deprived neighbourhoods.

**Table 2 about here**

The case study institution is an elite, research intensive university and is located in a large Scottish city. The university has around 29,000 students and offers a wide range of courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level with the majority of students studying humanities or social science subjects. It attracts a high proportion of middle class students with around a third coming from the fee-paying independent school sector, which caters for only 5% of Scottish pupils. It also caters for a high proportion of English and international students.

Over the past two decades, encouraged by the Scottish Funding Council, the university has developed a range of widening participation initiatives. These include: outreach activity in school; access courses aimed at mature students; student support in the form of counselling and study skills courses; and the development of part-time study routes. Contextual admissions policies also allow students from below-average achieving schools to enter courses with slightly lower qualifications than those attending above-average achieving schools. Bursaries are available for students from poorer backgrounds and disabled students. The latter groups are also entitled to receive reasonable adjustments in teaching and assessment. Progress against a range of equality indicators is monitored and an annual report is available on the university web-site.

Despite these efforts, the university has continued to recruit a disproportionate number of students from socially advantaged backgrounds. Although there was an increase in the number of students from state schools during the period 2004-2008, the proportion of students from more socially advantaged backgrounds remained high. Furthermore, the proportion of students from low participation neighbourhoods fell to 8%, against a

benchmark of 11%. The government is now exerting pressure on higher education institutions to admit more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, although the ancient universities, including this institution, have become more selective over time. Admission criteria are set by individual institutions and are not subject to government regulation. There are currently strong financial incentives to recruit more international undergraduates and postgraduates, since these students are charged very high fees. The university has established relatively generous bursaries for UK students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but whether this scheme will have the desired effect in terms of producing a more diverse intake remains to be seen.

***Case study of an Estonian research intensive public university***

In Estonia, higher education is provided in public and private universities and institutions of professional higher education. Since its accession into the EU, there has been a significant expansion and marketisation of higher education. At the time of writing (October 2013), there are six public universities, one private university, nine public professional higher education institutions, eleven private professional higher education institutions and two public vocational educational institutions. The following groups are recognised as under-represented: young people without sufficient knowledge of Estonian; people with physical disabilities; and young people from less developed parts of the country. Socio-economic disadvantage is not monitored per se, although there is clearly some overlap with other categories.

The case study institution is a research-intensive public university and is one of the largest and oldest in Estonia. Students are either self-funded or are awarded a state-sponsored scholarship. The university has an above average number of state-commissioned study places, so that, compared with private institutions, there are more students from less advantaged backgrounds. However, some state-commissioned places in sciences remain unfilled because students prefer to study 'softer' courses, such as business administration, which are mainly provided for a fee.

To encourage potential students, the university has for more than 50 years offered access courses, now administered by the Open University. There is a fee for these courses and they focus on the state examination subjects: Physics, Maths, Chemistry and Estonian language (grammar and essay writing skills). These are particularly useful for mature students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The university also organises courses, summer schools and workshops for upper secondary students, and is actively recruiting highly motivated young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since 2005, the university has run special programmes to encourage students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to apply. The university participates in a joint project consisting of larger state universities in Estonia to ensure the sustainability of science and technical education.

Other measures to promote the participation of under-represented groups include the following:

- The selection board admits up to five students with a disability, raised in an orphanage, or living in a shelter, who do not have to pay fees, regardless of their academic performance in admission tests.
- Each year the university admits 100-150 vocational school graduates, who make up about 10% of first year students. These students may be granted extra credits

on admission, and, although their general knowledge is poorer than that of traditional students, they are regarded as highly motivated and therefore likely to catch up.
- The university has established a college in North-Eastern Estonia, an area where Russian-speaking minorities are over-represented. In this college, three courses are taught in Russian, but Russian students also study some general subjects in Estonian. The college, financially supported by the Ministry of Education, enables these students to obtain a higher education degree closer to their home, which minimises their transport and subsistence costs.

The institution has a number of student support initiatives, including the following:
- Financial support for the highest-performing students if they are experiencing financial difficulties (1-2% of the total). Travel fare concessions are available to all students.
- As some students from disadvantaged backgrounds have problems with basic skills in sciences, all students can participate in catch-up courses following the US model. These involve studying secondary school Maths and Physics for 1.5 months.
- Russian is the first language for more than 40% of students in the university. To assist these students, in the first year some courses are taught in Russian and classes in Estonian are available. From the second year, all courses are taught in Estonian. Estonian language courses are financed by the state, so they are free of charge to all students.

***Case study of an Austrian University of Applied Sciences***

In Austria, as illustrated in table 3, the scientific universities and the universities of fine arts are the most prestigious and they recruit a much higher proportion of students from high socio-economic status backgrounds compared with the universities of applied sciences and teacher training academies.

**Table 3 about here**

The case study institution is a University of Applied Sciences spread over four different campuses in a region with a strong industrial tradition. The institution is publicly financed at national and regional level. Its main focus is on degree courses in the technical field (engineering and technology) and 75% of courses are in classical technical areas. One of the aims of the introduction of Universities of Applied Sciences in Austria in 1994 was to make tertiary education available to students from vocational backgrounds (mostly apprenticeships or medium level vocational school qualifications). Students at this type of tertiary institution generally do not pay any fees.

The institution offers a special two-semester bridging course (Studienbefähigungslehrgang), free of charge, to students lacking higher education entrance qualifications. These students have generally completed a vocational apprenticeship or have come from a three year vocational education and training school. Students who successfully complete the course are then able to enter a degree programme.

Another widening access initiative is a course aimed at women wanting to return to the labour market. The undergraduate course on product design and technology-

related communication was developed in cooperation with the regional public employment service (AMS). Potential female participants are prepared by the public employment service and receive information and financial support there. The course aims at strengthening female participation in technical study programmes at the institution. Its other aim is to provide mothers who want to (re)-enter the labour market with a qualification that enables them to gain employment in technological areas. Gender segregation is a strong phenomenon within the Austrian labour market, but also within the education system, where the participation rate of females in technological education programmes is still very low.

***Case study of a Flemish college of higher education***

As illustrated in table 4, only 2% of Flemish students from a low socio-economic background attend university, compared with more than 20% of students from a high socio-economic background.

**Table 4 about here**

The college was established in 1995 as the result of mergers involving 16 institutions of higher education. It has over 15,000 students and around 2,000 members of staff. Students in traditional universities tend to have higher socio-economic status than those at colleges of higher education (see table 4 above), and recent migrants are under-represented in higher education. The main difference between higher education colleges and traditional universities is that the former have a stronger vocational orientation and cannot award PhDs, although they can offer tuition up to Masters level.

Tuition fees are relatively low and the Flemish government provides a limited number of scholarships and grants to Belgian and foreign students. The scholarships are only granted if students fulfil specific conditions, such as not repeating an academic year and being registered as a regular student. There are also opportunities for students to apply for other scholarships offered by international organisations, such as Erasmus mobility scholarships, Tempus and Erasmus Mundus scholarships.

The normal admission requirement to a Bachelor programme is an upper secondary certificate, or an official equivalent, such as another certificate or diploma at a higher level. A relatively high proportion of students come from a vocational upper secondary background in comparison to students in universities. Students can gain entry through accreditation of prior learning and a member of staff offers support to students through the process.

The college has centres for study advice and student support. The first offers educational guidance and the latter student services such as accommodation, catering, cultural events, sports, medical assistance, transport and guidance for disabled students. There is also support for students with literacy difficulties.

These case studies, two of which are highly selective old universities and two of which are vocationally-orientated new universities with a more socially diverse student body, reflect the type of institutional stratification which is found within many European countries. The Austrian and Flemish case studies are of less prestigious institutions whilst the Scottish and Estonian case studies are of more prestigious institutions. In all countries, whilst there has been a considerable expansion of higher education, social stratification remains a key feature. Despite different types of compulsory education, Austria, Flanders and Scotland have very similar levels of stratification within their respective higher education systems. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to be found in newer colleges of higher education and universities of applied science rather than in traditional research-intensive institutions. In Estonia, there has been a considerable increase in private universities, although these are less academically selective than their state-run counterparts. Estonia does not monitor students' socio-economic status, although there is some evidence that the more selective public university have greater socially diversity, particularly in science and engineering, because of financial support for high achieving students from poorer backgrounds in these areas. Across all four countries, there is clear evidence that elite institutions are competing in a global market for the best qualified students and, increasingly, those who are able to pay the highest fees. Institutions vary greatly with regard to the extent to which they monitor patterns of participation, identify certain groups as being in need of additional support and promote student support services and initiatives. However, the patterns of stratification are clear and resistant to change.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to identify the EU's policy objectives in relation to the inclusion of under-represented groups in higher education and the extent to which commitments made at EU level to greater social inclusion within higher education are reflected in the policies and practices of member states. A key underlying question is the extent to which the soft governance underpinning the Bologna Process has been successful in harmonising approaches to widening access. Lažetić (2010) noted that, as in other areas of EU policy regulated by soft rather than hard governance, the implementation of the Bologna Process relied on a process of mutual adjustment and the willingness of countries to adopt similar policy goals.

In our initial discussion of the Bologna Process, we noted that considerable progress had been made in relation to areas likely to facilitate the free movement of students in a higher education market, for example, the development of common degree systems linked to the European Qualifications Framework. In relation to the social justice goals of the Bologna Process, however, there has been rather less progress. This is because member states vary in their understanding of which groups of students count as under-represented, and as a result, cross-country measurement of progress is very difficult. Within specific countries, there is great variation in the extent to which governments are committed to identifying disadvantaged groups and monitoring their participation rates and outcomes over time. Coupled with this, as noted by Gallacher in this special issue, there is a tendency within countries to growing differentiation between institutions, as those from socially advantaged backgrounds seek to hold on to their existing advantages at a time of economic insecurity. Elite institutions are also likely to be resistant to efforts by the state to encourage them to change their admissions policies. Iannelli (2011) pointed out that reducing social inequality in access to higher education tends to take place when the whole system is expanding. As illustrated in figure 1, a number of countries which have increased participation in higher education over the past two decades are signalling that this period is over and that over the next decade there is unlikely to be any further growth. This is likely to lead to stagnation in terms of broadening the social profile of students in higher education. By the same token, whilst many countries still have ambitions to grow their higher education system, it is far from certain that they will be able to do this during the coming years of reduced public spending.

Overall, it appears that he Open Method of Coordination has not been particular effective in achieving the social goals embedded in the Bologna Process because there has been a lack of accord between the priorities set by the EU and those of member states. Whilst the EU has been clear about the need to break the link between social class background and higher education participation for both economic and social reasons, member states have not fully supported this agenda. Within particular countries, the definition of which groups count as under-represented reflects complex and competing political priorities that are often highly idiosyncratic. Furthermore, there are strong pressures within member states from middle class parents who are anxious to preserve rather than challenge social class advantages. During times of economic recession, moves to weaken the advantages enjoyed by more privileged social groups are likely to be met with resistance. Unless national governments and institutions prioritise widening access initiatives, there is a danger that the progress towards greater social inclusion made in the 1990s will be reversed.

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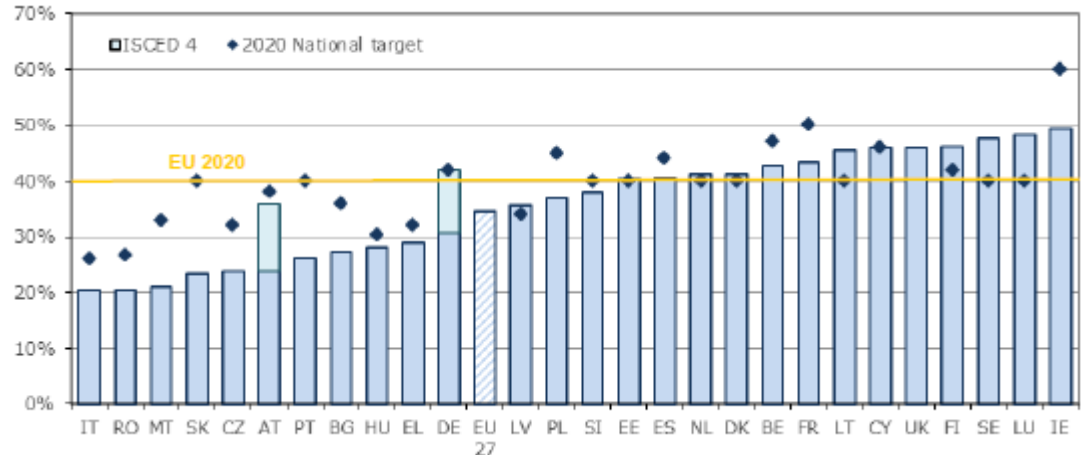
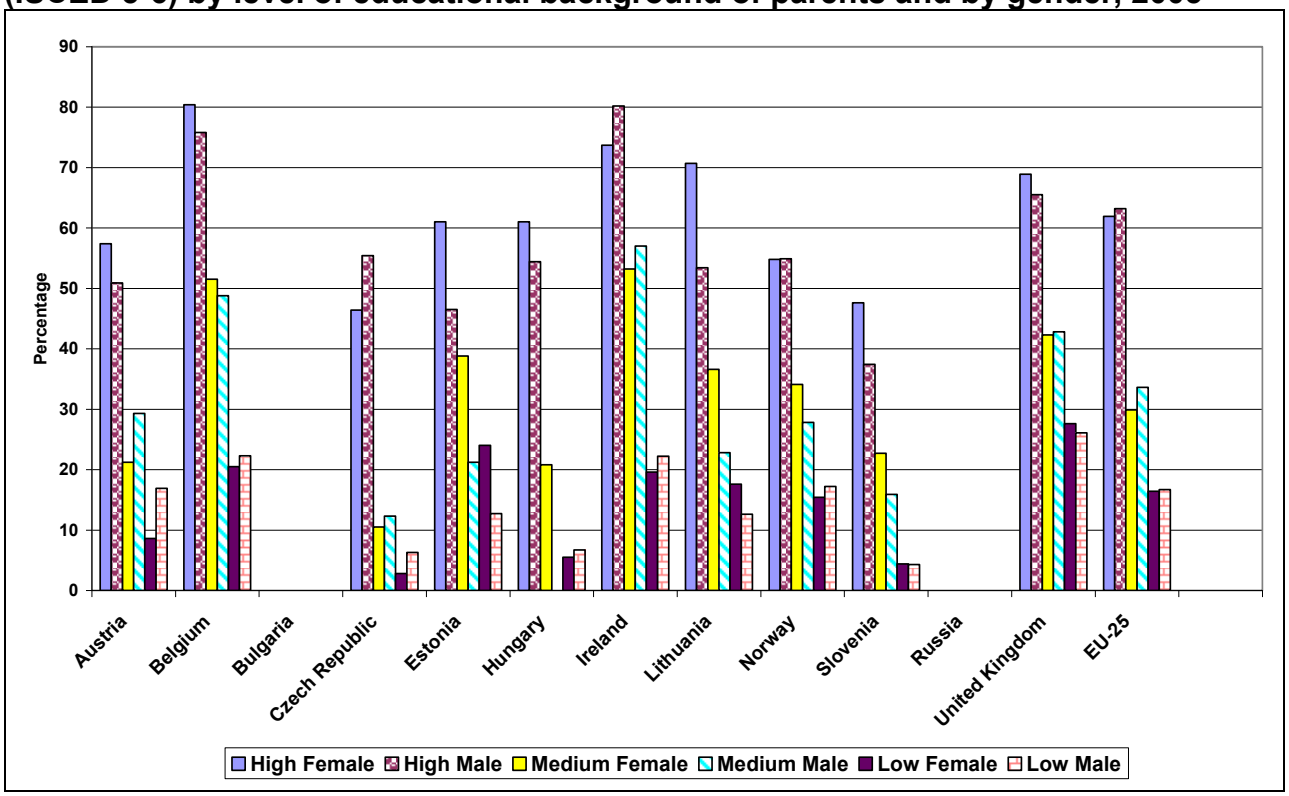
**Figure 1: Percentage of the population aged 30-34 having achieved tertiary education or equivalent in 2011 and national tertiary attainment targets to be achieved by 2020**



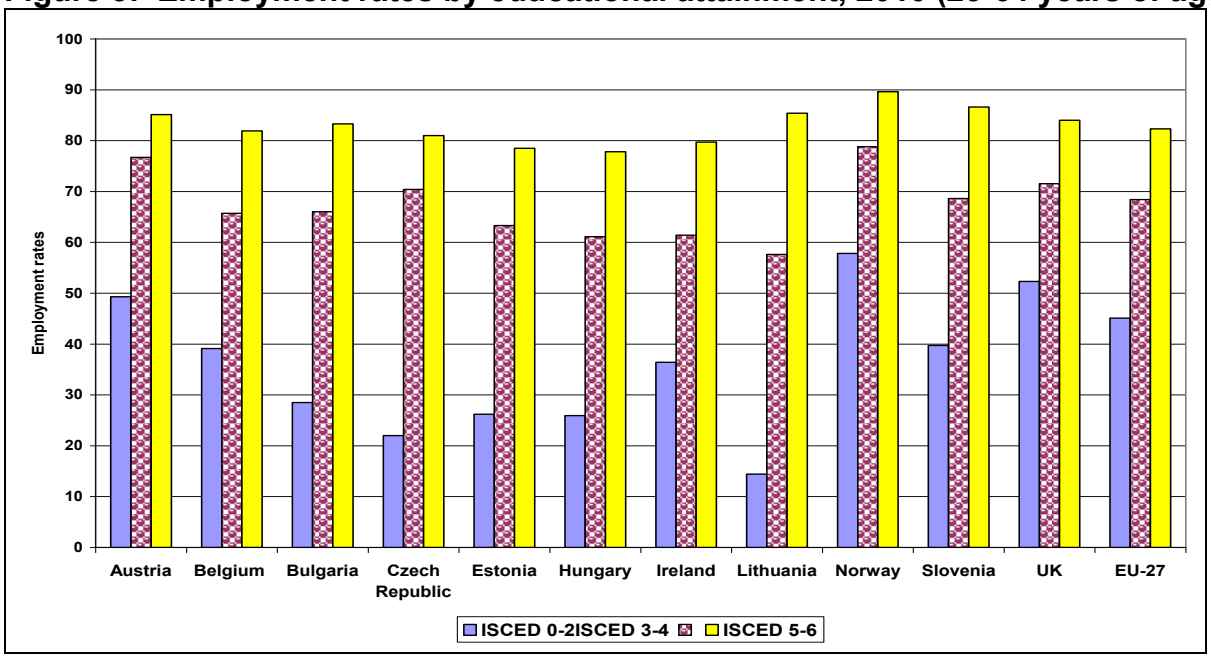

Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey). Note: The lighter parts of the bar for Austria and Germany demote inclusion of postsecondary attainment (ISCED 4), which is deemed to be equivalent to tertiary level vocational qualifications in other countries.

**Figure 2: Percentage of those aged 25+ who have completed tertiary education (ISCED 5-6) by level of educational background of parents and by gender, 2005**




Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC in European Communities and HIS, Hochschul-Informations-System GmbH, 2009.
Where available, data are presented for countries participating in the LLL2010 project.

**Figure 3: Employment rates by educational attainment, 2010 (25-64 years of age)**




Source: Eurostat, EU-LFS, accessed 10.06.2011

Where available, data are presented for countries participating in the LLL2010 project.

**Table 1: Main categories monitored on social dimension as recorded in EACEA, 2010, LLL 2010 countries**

| Country | Category/categories monitored |
|---|---|
| Austria | Educational background of parents; occupational type of parents; type of HE accession prerequisite; immigrants/migrant status; dependent children; special needs/handicapped |
| Belgium (Flanders) | Socio-economic status; migrant background; disability; gender |
| Bulgaria | Disabled students and students with low socioeconomic background (study free); orphans; people with disabilities; mothers of many children (3 or more) |
| Czech Republic | No monitoring |
| Estonia | Young people without sufficient knowledge of Estonian; people with physical disabilities; regional background; gender |
| Hungary | Disabled students; disadvantaged students; students belonging to the Roma ethnic minority; students rearing a small child/family supporters/students with a large family |
| Ireland | Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including members of the Travelling Community and refugees; students with a disability; mature students |
| Lithuania | Students with low socio-economic background; students with disabilities |
| Norway | No monitoring |
| Russia | Disabled people; people from the Chernobyl region; orphans; people without citizenship; migrants from the Commonwealth of Independent states; foreign students |
| Slovenia | Gender; students from underdeveloped regions; Roma students; students with special needs |
| UK: England, Wales and Northern Ireland | Socio-economic class; young people in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) as a proxy measure of low income; geography (low participation neighbourhoods); gender; ethnicity; disability; type of school attended |
| UK: Scotland | Socio-economically disadvantaged; gender; ethnicity; disability; prior participation in higher education by a family member; age |

Source: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA, 2010)

**Table 2: Percentage of students in different types of higher education institution in Scotland by deprivation quintiles, 2010/11**

| | Ancient universities | 1960s universities | Post '92 universities | Colleges |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Neighbourhood deprivation quintile | | | | |
| 1 (least deprived) | 38 | 30 | 26 | 17 |
| 2 | 25 | 24 | 22 | 18 |
| 3 | 17 | 19 | 19 | 20 |
| 4 | 12 | 15 | 18 | 22 |
| 5 (most deprived) | 7 | 11 | 16 | 23 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

**Table 3: Percentage of students in different types of tertiary level education institutions in Austria by socio-economic status**

| Socio-economic status | Low socio-economic status | Middle socio-economic status | Upper socio-economic status | High socio-economic status | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of institution | | | | | |
| Scientific Universities | 18.1 | 30.2 | 33.1 | 18.6 | 100 |
| Universities of Fine Arts | 15.1 | 25.1 | 39.8 | 19.8 | 100 |
| Universities of Applied Sciences | 23.4 | 34.8 | 31.9 | 9.9 | 100 |
| Teacher Training Academies | 20.9 | 34.4 | 35.6 | 9.1 | 100 |

Source: Unger et al. 2010. Data are drawn from a survey of parents of Austrian students conducted in 2009.
Social stratum was identified by using vocational position and educational attainment of parents.

**Table 4: Percentage of students from different socio-economic groups in specific types of higher education institutions[1]**

| Type of institution | Low socio-economic status | Middle socio-economic status | High socio-economic status | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| University | 2.1 | 6.8 | 23.3 | 9.8 |
| 4-year college | 1.7 | 3.8 | 8.8 | 4.5 |
| 2-year college | 13.7 | 28.2 | 27.7 | 24.4 |
| No tertiary education | 82.4 | 61.3 | 40.1 | 61.3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Figures based on the SONAR database - with thanks to Heidi Knipprath, HIVA / Policy Research Centre for Study and School Careers, Flanders.
SONAR = Studie van de overgang van ONderwijs naar ARbeidsmarkt (Studies of the transition from school to the labour market)
1. Figures based on a representative sample of 2984 people born in 1976